

The Characteristics of Genius

By CHARLES GIBSON, M.D.



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THE CHARACTERISTICS OF GENIUS.

A POPULAR ESSAY.

BY CHARLES GIBSON, M.D.,

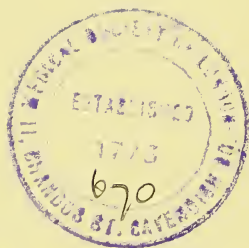
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PREFACE.

THIS essay is presented to the public in a popular form in the hope that it will adapt itself to the requirements of busy and thoughtful people, who have no time to expend upon the subtilties of metaphysical enquiry, but who, nevertheless, are eager for the acquisition of knowledge over and above that which appertains to the wants of everyday life.

Studies in mental philosophy have, for the most part, been regarded as intangible to ordinary observation, and unsuitable to minds which are incapable of the loftiest flights of reasoning, and even to the most capable, unless governed and directed by training in

methods of critical study. Nevertheless, the results of purely metaphysical investigations have been eminently unsatisfactory. Speculative bases have not afforded supports sufficiently firm upon which to raise a superstructure of sound work. Conclusions have been reached at once complicated and contradictory. Hypotheses have been substituted for theories. And exactitude in definition remains a desideratum.

It is assumed that much of this difficulty and uncertainty can be avoided by simpler methods of enquiry, and that truths may sometimes be elicited by the agency of common sense and common observation which elude the grasp of investigators of the highest order of intellectual culture.

C. G.

NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE,

January 1889.

The Characteristics of Genius.



GENIUS is an innate faculty of great minds, and holds its way through the activities of human life uncontrolled by passion and unsubdued by conventionalities. Latent it often is, by the necessities of time, place, and circumstance. Nevertheless, the history of genius is legibly written in the history of discoveries ; and in the ages which have passed away the flashes of intellectual light which have illumined the world, and raised and glorified men, have been the emanations of genius. In the inspirations of poetry and music ; in the conceptions of the agency and the power of numbers ; in the achievements of

4 *Characteristics of Genius.*

philosophy ; in the interpretation of new beauties in arts, and in the discovery of new truths in science, we behold the domain and the work of genius.

The very word "genius" carries with it a history of its own, although perhaps few English words have had attached to them so much variety of signification. It once owned a distinct mythology. The genii of past times were deities or saints who directed and governed mankind, and who, doubtless, received divine honours. Socrates, heathen though he was, was a great philosopher ; yet it is credited of him that he acknowledged a tutelary genius or demon, who informed him of coming events and directed—probably in a measure controlled—his behaviour. And so, doubtless, it has been in times long past with innumerable others.

More recently the element of superstition disappeared in the recognition of the presence of genii. They ceased to be incorporeal and to possess distinctive spiritual existences ; they became attributes only, yet shaping the actions and giving individuality and speciality to the lives of men. Goethe, in his autobiography, represents the poetic faculty dwelling within him as something quite beyond his control. Shakespeare tells us that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will."

In the conventional signification of the word, Genius is little more than vigorous intellectual work governed by good common sense. Helvetius regarded genius as sustained attention only. In the opinion of Hogarth genius is the outcome of hard work ; and that men who are capable of concentrated

6 *Characteristics of Genius.*

mental effort are competent to the development of genius. Sir Isaac Newton declared that if he had made discoveries, they were owing more to patient attention than to anything else. Descartes attributed his great results in the study of metaphysical philosophy to the superiority of his method. Mrs. Siddons attributed her whole superiority as an actress to the intense study which she devoted to her work. And like opinions have been expressed and entertained very generally. Sir William Hamilton remarks that "he who would with success attempt discovery, either by enquiry into the works of nature, or by meditation on the phenomena of mind, must acquire the faculty of absenting himself for a season from the invasion of surrounding objects, must be able, even, in a certain degree, to emancipate himself from the dominion of the body, and live, as it were, a pure intelligence within the circle of his own thoughts." This idea receives

illustration in the fact that Newton was often lost in meditation, his mind appearing on such occasions to have severed its connection with the body, and to have acted an independent part by virtue of its own inherent force. Such a concentration of mental effort, indeed, is apparently the thing needed to give the philosopher the full benefit of his powers, and if governed by genius, to enable him to develop new truths in the objects of his contemplation. Popularly, then, the word indicates intellectual activity and pre-eminent ability. But the man of genius has pre-eminence by an inborn power—a power which eventuates in, and is manifested by, original thought and original work; in a word, by discovery. Here is a power which is not simply the outcome of intellectual efforts—a power which appears to be intuitive and which is innate, which may be, and generally is, enhanced by education, by use, but which

8 *Characteristics of Genius.*

nevertheless lives and moves within, whether it is highly educated or not. There is an inventive quality in the mental organisation of the man of genius—a quick and keen vitality. He comes into the world with the divine afflatus already provided for. He cannot be made by art, or industry, or time, or place, or by all these conditions together. There is an individuality, a spontaneity, and a force in true genius which cannot be imitated, although time, place, and circumstance shall have much to do in evoking the manifestation of it.

The man of genius, then, is not to be identified with the man of mere talent. The latter does a few things pre-eminently well; the former possesses a power which pervades his whole being. Talent, indeed, is a natural endowment, but its function or office espe-

cially relates to acquisition or imitation; as, for example, in musical skill, or in public speaking. Men of talent often inherit this faculty from a parent. Genius, too, is inherited, but it is rather the outcome of a physical organisation which is not special to either parent, and which becomes individualised in the offspring. A talent for music implies a quick perception of the harmonies of sound and an aptitude in performance; while a talent for oratory demands a keen perception of the analogies of facts, a power of expressing the feelings of the speaker, and a ready delivery. These, however, are not the characteristics of genius. Men of talent are to be found in all races at all times. The divine gift of genius is conspicuous by its rarity.

Knowledge has come upon mankind in waves—throes, as it were, of men's intelli-

gence. In due time it has assumed distinctive characteristics, and become applicable to distinctive purposes. Nevertheless, the mere accumulation of facts does not necessarily constitute wisdom ; nor does it absolutely represent progress. Man's advancement demands something beyond this. It requires an originating intelligence, transcendent, far-seeing. It demands, too, a power to rearrange acquired facts, to set them in order, and to give them suitable application—demands, in fact, the vivifying agency of a creative and of a constructive genius. And its achievement affords infallible evidence of the character of the agent.

Matters of belief have, in all ages, held men's minds in thrall. And the philosophers of past times have, not unfrequently, endeavoured to reach just conclusions by reason-

ing upon unsound premises ; have laboured to educe truth from barest assumption. The work of genius has been obstructed rather than advanced by such labours. For example : the alchemists assumed that all metals were composite bodies, the baser containing the elements of gold, and differing from others in the amount and the variety of their impurities. These were unfortunate conditions upon which genius might operate. But the difficulties were enhanced by another, still graver, assumption—that a substance might, and would, almost certainly, be found capable of transmuting the baser metals into gold. The nobility of gold was supreme. The employment of a little more work in the laboratory and the study—the application of a little more knowledge and a little more skill—and perchance—almost without doubt—gold would be produced in any quantity at the will of the alchemist ! Disappointments

were succeeded by fresh efforts. Knowledge did accumulate, but the transmutation of the baser metals into gold was never achieved. Nevertheless, still another assumption pervaded the minds of the philosophers of the time: the possibility was recognised of so imbuing the human body with this noble metal, or other substance, that it would become proof against destructive agencies; and the discovery of an Elixir Vitæ became the aim and the pursuit of eager men. The classic story of the "Rape of the Golden Fleece," according to Suidas, is another illustration of a pervading belief in the omnipotence of gold. In his lexicon of the eleventh century he affirms that the Golden Fleece was but a parchment, upon which was written a description of processes to be employed in the conversion of the baser metals into gold.

In like manner the craving of men of all ages and countries has been for some standard of religious belief, at once absolute and unchallengeable. When Mahomet promulgated his religious ideas—engrafted, as they appear to have been, upon the pure Christianity which found a home in communities of higher civilisation—he perceived, and provided for, conditions of religious life which were in harmony with the peculiar requirements of his countrymen. And although his ideas will, sooner or later, almost certainly cease to be regarded as valid data for the foundation of catholic religious life, the duration, and the extent, and the enthusiasm of Mahometanism are undeniable evidence of the genius of its founder. The same remarks may be made of other forms of religious doctrine.

The very presence of men of genius constitutes a kind of spiritualised force,

purifying and ennobling wherever it is operative. The influence, in this way, of a Homer, for example, has been incalculably great, and so has been that of nationalities, as, for example, the Greek and the Roman. The works of Plato and of Cæsar have been potent factors in the development of national characteristics in successive generations. And perhaps not less so have been the purifying and ennobling works of Phidias and of Raphael in their illustration of the loveliness of form and of colour. And, doubtless, the requirements of peoples henceforth will be, as they have been, the attainment of the highest intellectual and physical refinement and power in order to consummate individual and national happiness—to make provision against suffering and disease and death. And herein we perceive the culmination of the purposes and of the work of genius.

Although the condition of communities necessarily varies with the exigencies of time and circumstance, it admits of demonstration that genius requires a certain pabulum in order to its healthful manifestation in such communities. Every man has carried with him from the time of his birth his specific potentiality, and owes his individuality to his parentage. "The boy is father to the man." Still he is a creature of circumstances, and is moulded to some extent by his surroundings. The demands of a people or of a time are responded to somewhat in the ratio of such demands. Philosophers are not developed among savages, and genius has no home in the ranks of barbarians. Genius, then, may be latent—awaiting opportunity; but given opportunity, the man is often forthcoming. All races or communities, indeed, have their leaders. But such leaders are not of necessity greatly above the common level. Varia-

tions do occur, and the man whose physical and mental power, whose originality, whose knowledge, whose enthusiasm, is fitted for the exigencies of the time and the people, becomes the leader. A man of talent he must be ; a man of genius he may be. Buckle, the learned and able author of the unfinished *History of Civilisation*, maintained that the characteristics of men are developed from their natural surroundings, and differ from each other in mental and bodily peculiarities as objective surroundings differ. Dr. Bucknill affirms in like manner that the individual man reflects his fellow-man, and that he is the creature of his social surroundings. Doubtless these ideas have some foundation in fact, but they are only partially true. The human intellect cannot be so limited in its scope, and with it the human body bears a specificity which rises superior to objective surroundings merely. Genius cannot be reflected, although

it is often concealed. And it does not admit of doubt that thousands of men of genius have traversed the world of their being from the cloudland of their start in life, through the broad daylight of their worldly career, into the darkness of its close, without one ray of the inspiration of the souls within them having been shed upon the purposes of their fellow-men, or upon their own. Perhaps

“ Chill penury repressed their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.”

Social conventionalities often sadly impede the free action of innate superiority, and genius cannot readily display its power in communities which are characteristically monotonous or motionless.

That the brain is the organ of the mind is indisputable, whatever difference of opinion

there may be as to the mode in which organ and function are correlated, and peculiarities of conformation and of structure of brain necessitate peculiarities in mental bias and in mental power. Hence the absurdity of assuming natural equality in man. Again, it must be recognised that all knowledge of the external world is obtained through the special senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. But the brain alone perceives, takes cognisance of impressions made upon the organs of the special senses. The existence of these special senses implies the existence of consciousness. This faculty of consciousness is the starting-point of intellectual action, and upon it is reared the superstructure of all mental qualities. The absence of brain, then, implies the absence of consciousness ; and the absence of consciousness necessitates the absence of intellect. Perceived phenomena are registered in the mental store-house, the

memory (the sweet muse-mother of Æschylus), and become absolute knowledge when recalled and subjected to the higher faculties of the mind, as comparison and its congener, causality—knowledge available for the demands and the purposes of daily life. The exercise of the faculty of recollection is at once the means by which memory can be utilised, and absolute evidence of its existence. A fact once observed is, perhaps, never absolutely lost in the lifetime of the individual, but it may demand the adaptation of special circumstances, in order that it may be realised and utilised.

The man of genius and the clown certainly do not perform the same mental work; the brain functions are remarkably different. The conclusion is inevitable, that brains performing different functions must also be different. Even by the agency of temperament the brain functions, like every function of the body, sustain modification—the fine quickening

20 *Characteristics of Genius.*

nervous temperament bears a very different relation to brain work from that of the dull *leucophlegmatic* ; and although a structural basis may not be demonstrable by microscopic or chemical analysis, it is absolutely certain that a specialised organisation exists and is operative in the man of genius, whether this is confined to the brain or not ; and if confined to the brain, whether this is represented by quality or proportion, or both.

This speciality of organisation evolves characteristically the faculty of imagination, upon which, in fact, genius very greatly depends, and without which it does not exist—the faculty or power of imagining a new constitution of things, either by their rearrangement, or by a primary or original evolution of ideas out of the intelligence of the individual. Imagination—ideality—like

genius, is thus divisible into two forms—constructive and creative. But genius demands something more than imagination in its constitution. It essentially demands the accompaniment of this ideality with a fine judgment—a capability of instituting sound comparisons of effects with causes, wherever and however manifested, and a readiness of achievement when stimulated by occasion.

This idea-forming faculty—the imagination—is, as pointed out by Dugald Stewart, the great source of human activity and the principal instrument of human progress. Destroy this faculty, “and the condition of man will become as stationary as that of the brutes.” In both its creative and constructive forms the inborn bent of mind or disposition is surely shown. When Praxiteles, the celebrated sculptor of over two thousand years ago, was invited to produce a figure of Venus for the people of Cos, his imagination at once

suggested the moulding, as it were, of the items of beauty in each of his models in such wise as to constitute a whole which was ideally perfect. Phidias formed his celebrated statue of Jupiter Olympus by the constructive force of his own imagination from Homer's description of that deity. When Homer himself formed the idea of Chimera, he joined into one animal parts which belonged to several animals—the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. These are good examples of constructive imagination, as they are of constructive genius. But equally fine examples abound.

The creative imagination shapes out conceptions which no human skill could produce. It is shown in its loftiest forms when associated with and governed by judgment (constituting genius) in the discovery of great fundamental truths in the sciences and in the arts, in the universe around, and in the minds of men ;

not merely developing and recombining the results of observation and of reflection, but evolving absolutely new products which reasoning alone could never evolve. Genius, says Channing, is not a creator in the sense of fancying or feigning that which does not exist ; its distinction is to discern more of truth than ordinary minds could do. "All really great thought tends to elevate human nature to its own level, and the philosophers, the prophets, and the poets whom we now venerate as the noblest benefactors of our race have earned their claim to that distinction, not by bringing to us messages from other spheres which they alone were privileged to visit, but by enunciating truths which our expanded intellect accepts as self-evident, by proclaiming great principles which our deepened insight perceives to constitute the basis of all morality, by creating forms of beauty to which our heightened and purified sense looks as

standards of ideal perfection. All this could not be unless the intuitions of genius call forth echoes from the depths of our own souls, awakening dormant faculties which can apprehend if they cannot create, which can respond if they cannot originate." The creative imagination is exercised in at least as high a degree in science as it is in art, or even in poetry.

The faculty of imagination, then, is absolutely necessary to the development of genius. It is the attribute of genius, but other intellectual and receptive faculties doubtless help to rear the offspring of imagination to maturity. The inventor is essentially a man of genius; yet a man can scarcely be said to have invented until his judgment has been exercised, although the nicest judgment unattended by imagination cannot bestow a single spark of genius. "A man of mere judgment is indeed essentially different from a man of genius. The former can exercise his reason

only on subjects provided by others ; the latter can provide subjects for himself. And this is solely owing to his possession of a fine imagination, which the other has not. The fire of genius concentrates and intensifies the force of mental operations, and by the natural influence of imagination impels men as if they were inspired." Here is discernment by direct insight, "the vision and the faculty divine." Imagination initiates all inventions, and exercises great influence in carrying them on to perfection. It developes into genius chiefly by the tendency which it has to associate different perceptions. Judgment cannot generate ideas, but it does advise those which have been generated. It measures the relationship of perceptions supplied by the senses, whether they are recalled from the memory or they are direct, whether primitive and pure, or they are modified by imagination. Doubtless many useful innovations have been the

result of accident or the outcome of necessity, but this generally applies only to a rearrangement of things, in order to effect a better or more suitable adaptation to circumstances. A novel movement on the chess-board by a tyro in chess could hardly be regarded as an invention. But when the boy Potter overcame the irksome character of his work of attending to the valves and cocks in Newcomen's steam-engine, in the early part of the eighteenth century, by substituting for hand labour certain cords and catches, which he ingeniously connected with the beam of the engine in such wise, that with its recurring movement a regular self-acting agency in the opening and shutting of the valves was accomplished, his achievement certified the possession by him of the distinctive quality of constructive genius.

The phenomena of Dreaming attest, on many occasions, a creative and a constructive power, and thus display kinship with the faculty of imagination rather than with that of fancy. The mind of the dreamer is often uninfluenced by its immediate surroundings ; and although its objects are commonly kaleidoscopic, and its manifestations rapid and transitory, it can develop ideas which could not be evolved in the waking state. Its work is involuntary. The senses are quiescent in sleep, and hence convey to the dreamer no extraneous influence upon which it can operate, and by which it can be diverted. Images stored up in the memory are recalled, and upon these the dreamer expatiates—upon these he develops new forms and constructs new arrangements. Condorcet and others have executed problems during sleep which had been matters of exceeding difficulty during waking hours,

Zwinglius and others have had revealed to them during sleep matters of memory which could not be recollected during the busy hours of working day. Artists have developed in dreamland pictorial compositions of which they were incapable in the waking state ; and the faculty of dreaming has oftentimes been wooed in the hope that new images, calculated to aid in the work of literary composition, would be the outcome. In the literary world persons are said to have provoked dreaming by artifice, in order to help them in their work as authors ; and probably the expedient is not by any means uncommon. Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" was composed during sleep, and was written off when the sleep had passed away. Sir W. Hamilton quotes the following case from Abel's Collection of remarkable phenomena from human life :—"A young man had cataleptic attacks, in consequence of which a singular effect was

produced. Some six minutes after falling asleep he began to speak distinctly, and almost always of the same objects, and concatenated events, so that he carried on from night to night the same history, or rather continued to play the same part. On waking he had no remembrance whatever of his dreaming thoughts. He played a double part in his existence : by day he was the poor apprentice to a merchant ; by night he was a married man, the father of a family, a senator, and in affluent circumstances. If during his vision anything was said in regard to his waking state, he declared it unreal and a dream."

It is noteworthy that many persons who have lost their sight have lost also the faculty of representing the images of visible objects. Hamilton remarks that in these cases not merely the eye has been disorganised, but that the disorganisation has extended to the optic nerves and thalami, and that if the eye only

is destroyed, the imagination of colours and forms remains.

Then, although often used synonymously, imagination may not be confounded with Fancy. "Imagination," says Bacon, "is the representative of individual thought." Fancy revels in fiction, and displays itself in the conception of impossibilities. "I can conceive a thing that is impossible," says Reid, "but I cannot distinctly imagine a thing that is impossible." The operations of imagination involve the idea of invention—of the evolution of a new order of things. Fancy, on the other hand, associates the different materials which are subservient to imagination. But imagination is degraded in working with the materials of fancy. There is an unreality in fancy which has no place in imagination—which, indeed, is expressed in the fact that the word was originally written "phantsy," and bore identity with phantasy. Doubtless the

two words are often used indiscriminately, and hence erroneously. But if comparison should be carried further, it might justly be accepted that the relationship or analogy between fancy and wit is quite as close as that between fancy and imagination. Wordsworth has this happy illustration: "Sunbeams upon distant hills gliding apace, with shadows in their train, might, with small help from fancy, be transformed into fleet oreads sporting visibly." And possibly the oreads—the mountain nymphs—of Milton had precisely the same origin. It is usual to speak of the imagination of the poet and the fancy of the artist. And commonly the language is fairly accurate. But the fact remains that the work of the painter and of the sculptor is often the outcome of lofty ideation. Both wit and fancy may be concerned in the production of new combinations for contemplation. But wit demands that they shall be rapid and

startling, while fancy, demanding change, does not require surprise nor rapidity of evolution. Both, however, derive incalculable advantages by association with imagination. Imagination can dispense with either wit or fancy, or with both. Still it must be recognised that in fancy there is exercised, from time to time, in the combinations and fashionings of the mental images received, a spontaneity and a suggestiveness which render the establishment of a line of demarcation between it and imagination a matter of difficulty. Then, again, fancy is to imagination very much what reason is to wit. The higher mental energies—thought and will—are harmonised by reason with the sensuous organisation.

Æsthetic manifestations, as shown by the faculty of taste, hold a high position in the

intellectual life of man. They are the expression of a complex mental organisation. Taste must be regarded as a derived faculty ; but it claims kindred with imagination, administers to its pleasures, and cannot be severed from it. It may even claim a loftier relationship : it is akin to genius. It involves a necessity for originality, and demands an exercise of judgment. Its objects are multi-form, but they all conform to a standard which imagination has developed from knowledge in matters of beauty—moral, physical, and intellectual, as well as that relating to size, form, proportion, colour, etc., in matters of common observation. The same impressions are made upon the organs of vision in those critically informed in matters of taste as upon those of persons ignorant in such matters ; but the former will perceive a thousand qualities in the objects under observation which completely elude the grasp of

the latter. Taste is perfected by sustained study and close attention.

The history of genius, then, is rather a part of the history of civilisation than of humanity, while the manifestation of it is barely possible in races or communities which have not made some advance in intellectual culture. When it is displayed it is, beyond a doubt, the outcome of a special physical organisation. Its images of objects are impalpable to common observation, and have a character of originality quite their own. This originality has a spontaneousness also peculiar to itself. It is not talent merely, although a man of genius often displays special aptitudes. It is not imagination merely, although the work of genius is impossible without the agency of imagination. Neither is imagination competent to display genius unless its action is

governed by the highest intellectual faculties : comparison and the like.

It would be delusive, then, as it would be unfair, to expect in men of genius special aptitudes in the working of the various allied faculties. For example : a man of genius is not, *ipso facto*, a man of taste, although very frequently a finely appreciative taste accompanies his genius, giving dignity, and, it may be, refinement, to the character of his work. Neither has he, as a matter of necessity, an exquisite fancy. His work is too real for its expression often ; but there is nothing in the organisation of the man of genius necessarily excluding the operation of the most brilliant fancy. It is, however, but an incident in his life-history, and may actually be obstructive in the more solid work of his imagination and of his judgment.

Men of genius are often eccentric ; and eccentricity is generally regarded as “the badge of all their tribe.” In the line of its action it is irresistible. The fire of genius, like a divine impulse, elevates the mind, and inspires while it is operative. There is an enthusiastic ardour—an intensity of interest—a passionate zeal, developed in the exertions of genius which is not often found elsewhere. Concentration of intellectual action on any subject indisposes, perhaps unfits, for close attention to many other subjects ; and, as Madden remarks, “if the trembling sensibility, which is often the accompaniment of genius, makes temptations more accessible, it makes moral influences more accessible also ; so that, in point of fact, the history of men of genius is, on the whole, remarkably noble and pure.” But often “they cannot bow down and kiss the crimson robe of good society with graceful homage.” Their carriage often

fails to conciliate strangers, and their foibles often weary friends. Let it be remembered, however, that genius has not the privilege of being judged by its peers. Great men often have their littlenesses ; which are rather the accidental accompaniments than necessarily the products of their greatness. Most men who have had opportunities of studying and judging their fellow-men will agree with Madden when he says that the tendency of knowledge obtained by such study is to foster love of mankind ; and that it is to the practical and thorough knowledge of human nature which the physician obtains in the exercise of his art, that the active benevolence and general liberality which peculiarly distinguishes the medical profession is mainly to be attributed. Madden further justly observes that the more extensive our knowledge of human nature is, and the more we appreciate the strong influence which mind and body

mutually exert, the greater will be the indulgence towards the errors of mankind. Again, it is hardly conceivable that men endowed with the greatness of genius can live and move and have their being under precisely the same conditions as hold in men who are not so endowed. Their thoughts, their aspirations, have necessarily a different bias and a different aim ; while habits of exciting and exhausting study must needs have their influence. Their actions, then, are often peculiar, eccentric—nay, perhaps grotesquely peculiar. It is said of Richelieu, the cardinal-duke, the great minister of France under Louis the Fourteenth, that he amused himself by prancing round his billiard-table like a horse, kicking out, from time to time, upon his servants as he stepped along ; and that Haydn could not summon a single idea if he began composing without placing on his finger a diamond ring which was presented to

him by his patron, Frederick the Second. Spinoza, the astute metaphysician, satisfied his soul by philosophy, while he satisfied his body with the small means which he obtained by polishing telescopic and microscopic glasses ; and that he refused a pension, because it involved the necessity of dedicating his work on Mental Philosophy to Louis the Fourteenth. Who but Spinoza could have understood the real dignity of this forbearance, on the one hand, and the degradation of the course which he declined to pursue, on the other ? “ He who is to follow philosophy,” says Ptolemy, “ must be a freeman in mind.”

The man of genius undoubtedly is often eccentric ; but this eccentricity is not unfrequently the outcome of an enthusiasm which would make the world “ a brave poetic fiction.” “ I see,” says Shelley, “ that in some external attributes other men resemble me ; but when, misled by the appearance, I have

thought to appeal to something in common, and unburthen my inmost soul to them, I have found my language misunderstood, like one in a distant and savage land." Akenside was peculiar—eccentric; peculiar in his irritability, his egotism, and his sententiousness. Sheridan was peculiar in his carelessness of matters of daily life, in his indifference of public opinion, in his regardlessness of the means of sustenance and pecuniary provision for the to-morrow. His brilliant genius flashed out fitfully. So was Sheridan's countryman Goldsmith,—“in wit a man, simplicity a child.” Francis Bacon, James's great Lord Chancellor—“the wisest, brightest, meanest of mankind”—was peculiar; and so have been, and will be, hundreds of other great men. They have their failings like other men, but it would not be correct to assert that their failings were the result of their greatness—of their genius. Peter the

Great of Russia was eccentric, but he was a man whose originality of thought and purpose, whose enthusiasm and activity, can hardly be paralleled in ancient or modern times. He reformed the whole system of the government and the social manners of the people of Russia. He developed the military and naval instincts of his subjects. And at length, when wearied of the work of government, he abdicated his throne in favour of his wife Catherine, he himself walking on foot at the ceremony of her imperial inauguration as captain of her guard. But eccentricity is not confined to men of genius, nor are men of genius always eccentric.

Then men of genius are said to have often been insane—that genius and insanity are common companions. And it would be easy to show that many men of genius have been

the subjects of mental derangement. Carlyle describes this realm as "a fair country, containing thirty millions of men, mostly fools." Men of genius, like other men, do become insane, but public opinion is sadly at variance with facts in its estimate of the extent of this terrible evil as it affects men of genius. And it would be most unjust to assume that its occurrence in these extraordinary men is always in the relation of cause and effect—that, in fact, genius issued from the same organic conditions as insanity. Men, whether urged by the enthusiasm of genius or not, may not transgress nature's laws without incurring nature's penalties. There is an intellectual strength in the possession of men of genius which may not be found in other men. But there is with it originality of thought and action. When these transcend the understanding of the onlooker it may quite reasonably be expected that the latter will doubt the

mental soundness of the former, just as in social life the self-denying and otherwise purely moral cannot be understood by the moral lawbreaker, who has imbibed with his earliest knowledge a belief that it is his duty and his interest to gratify himself whenever possible, and to set at nought the needs or the rights of others.

The irritability and the eccentricity observed, from time to time, in illustrious men have been regarded as indications of insanity ; and it is sometimes impossible to decide with accuracy whether an entirely novel view of a subject is the conception of far-seeing genius or it is the vision of a diseased brain. And the fervour of purpose, the fine sensibility, the continued pursuit of single or limited objects, and the mental isolation which commonly, and almost necessarily, belong to the life-work of genius, are well calculated to overstrain the mind, and finally to topple over the

understanding. Again, the intellectual character of the life of the man of genius is a more absolute thing than holds beyond the sphere of his existence. His isolation fosters the habit of introspection, and the griefs, hardships, disappointments, and hopes deferred, which from time to time assail him, are likely enough to culminate in mental aberration. Insanity in men of genius may be found in all classes of society.

There is evidence to show that Tasso assumed madness in order to satisfy the offended dignity of his patron, Duke Alfonso ; yet it is absolutely certain that he was confined for years as a madman. Like Socrates, he had his familiar spirit or genius, which from time to time appeared to him. It is manifestly unsafe to speculate upon the relationship between the real and the assumed malady in Tasso's case, but this much is indisputable, that in the long interval which

elapsed between the two events the genius of the poet shone forth brilliantly.

The passionate, fitful, chequered life of the gifted Swift is one of the most extraordinary on record. The expression of Swift's countryman was realised in Dean Swift—"A vigorous mind," says Burke, "is as necessarily accompanied by violent passion as a great fire with great heat." Swift was a man whose soul could be attuned to the softest, gentlest music, but which could be aroused to the most tempestuous energy. This unhappy condition of Swift's mind was palpably connected in the latter part of his time with diseased brain: giddiness and deafness assailed him; his memory failed; ungovernable rage followed; and this was succeeded by furious madness. One phase more, and we see him quiet, passionless, idiotic, in which condition death gently overtook him.

Chatterton, "the marvellous boy, the sleep-

less soul that perished in his pride," committed suicide. As a mere child Chatterton showed his poetic genius. At only eleven years of age, and with a very limited education, he composed a little poem, which commences—

“Almighty framer of the skies !
O let our pure devotion rise,
Like incense in thy sight ;
Wrapt in impenetrable shade,
The texture of our souls was made,
Till thy command gave light.”

His unconquerable pride led him into a career of imposture. This he sustained with a power which probably has never been surpassed. He created genealogical trees, gave descriptions of ceremonies which had never taken place, and composed a sermon, or part of one, on the divinity of the holy spirit, which he declared to have been written in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. He nevertheless failed in the objects of his

literary efforts, became a drunkard, and ended his short but marvellous career before he had attained his eighteenth year. His body was interred in the burial-ground of Shoe Lane Workhouse.

The poetic genius of Shelley is unquestioned and unquestionable ; yet his career, with all his transcendent gifts, was a supremely wretched one. At seventeen years he rose in antagonism against his pastors and masters at Oxford. He was dismissed from the University. Cast off by his parents and thrown upon the world, fragile in health and in frame, he was yet supported by his own ardent and heroic nature ; while it must be conceded to him that he sincerely believed his opinions to be founded on truth, and that for these he sacrificed station, fortune, and dearest affections. At the age of eighteen he produced his extraordinary atheistical poem, "Queen Mab," a work which fell into the hands of a

piratical bookseller, and was published by him. Shelley disclaimed the opinions contained in this poem—"villainous trash," as he called it; they were the crude notions of his youth. He was drowned in the Bay of Spezzia in the twenty-ninth year of his age. Like his friend Byron he had a wish to die young. With all his faults, Shelley was, perhaps, the grandest metaphysical poet, as he is said to have been one of the best classical scholars, in Europe. Nevertheless, his life was a failure in almost every particular. His nearest relatives rejected him; he suffered torments of mental and bodily pain, and was the subject of extraordinary illusions. No wonder, then, that he had difficulty in bearing up against the mental dejection which fitfully attacked him.

Cowper was fortune's favourite in regard to worldly goods. Early in life Cowper became Clerk to the Journals of the House of Lords,

but he lacked confidence in himself, and failed to appear at the bar of the House. He became miserable, and thence speedily insane. He gradually recovered his reason, and became fervently religious. By the genial and generous help of sensible and amiable women, Cowper, like many another fallen man, was restored to comparative cheerfulness, and forthwith devoted himself to literature. Henceforward life with him flowed on more peacefully, yet with sad repetitions of his terrible malady—insanity. Death overtook him in his sixty-ninth year.

Julius Cæsar, one of the foremost men the world has ever seen, was an epileptic ; and so, indeed, was the great Napoleon Buonaparte. Sir Isaac Newton, in middle life, suffered for a short period from mental aberration.

The characteristics of genius are said to be

closely analogous with those of instinct. Pure instinct, however, is a development of animal life, which is handed down, repeated, from parent to offspring, almost without variation (a kind of inherited memory). It is not the outcome of volition, nor of reason, and still less of imagination. It is the manifestation of an impulse from within the individual, and, at the same time, of a necessity of its being. On ascending the gradations of animal life, however, it becomes apparent that instinctive actions often have reason for their associate, and consciousness, the antecedent of all reason, for their foundation ; that in their highest developments the lines of demarcation between them and the operation of reason are not always easily determined ; and that, just as surely as with genius, instinctive actions in their various forms are the outcome and the expression of congenital peculiarities of organisation. Reason itself is inoperative without

data afforded by the faculty of observation, and volition only operates upon assumed or established facts. In themselves they originate nothing; and it is easily demonstrable that many self-evident conclusions or items of belief in man can be traced back to instinctive beginnings, and that they have acquired force in passing through successive generations, higher and higher, until they have become directing influences in thoughts and actions. The faculty of imagination is of gradual, though often of rapid, growth. "All ideas," remarks Condillac, "are transformed sensations." Nevertheless, it may safely be affirmed that no man ever acquired, by industry or perseverance, by himself or by the aid of others, the creative power of genius. Like instinct, it develops with the development of mind up to its highest stature. Genius has not yet been found in the feeble-minded, nor in lowly-organised races or communities of men.

These statements are in perfect harmony with the fact that many animals show a marvellous intelligence, and perform acts which, in their originality and spontaneity, are startlingly like those of genius. Instinctive operations, moreover, are modified—elevated—by the supervention of consciousness, and become volitional by the agency of reason.

Here is an example related by James Hogg, "the Ettrick shepherd," of his dog "Sirrah." About seven hundred lambs, which were at once under his care, broke away at midnight, and scampered off in three divisions across the hills. The night was dark, but "Sirrah" silently set off in search of the recreant flock. The shepherd and his companion did not fail to do all that was in their power to recover their lost charge. They spent the whole night in scouring the hills for miles around, but neither of the lambs nor of "Sirrah" could they obtain the slightest trace. On their way

back, however, they "discovered a body of lambs at the bottom of a deep ravine, and the indefatigable 'Sirrah' standing in front of them, looking all round for some relief, but still standing true to his charge. The race was then up, and we discovered by degrees that not one lamb of the whole flock was wanting. The charge was left solely to himself, from midnight to the rising of the sun." The intelligence of animals, of which the above is a remarkable illustration, is the expression of an hereditary bias—of a special organisation. Dogs of other breeds cannot be taught to herd sheep after the manner of "Sirrah" or of his kind.

The architectural and building instinct of the Beaver has been the occasion of wonderment in all ages. The originality of design which they display in the erection of their lodges, varying, as they do, with the varying circumstances of their existence, and the

special means which they employ to obtain and to lay up stores of food necessary for future use, certainly indicate the existence of an instinct which is supervised and modified by a high intelligence.

Carpenter quotes from Mr. Jesse a fine example in birds, of the instinctive faculty guided by intelligence, and displaying originality :—" A pair of jackdaws endeavoured to construct their nest in one of the small windows that lighted the staircase of an old tower. The sill of the window, as is usual in such windows, sloped considerably inwards, and, consequently, there being no level base for the nest, as soon as a few sticks had been laid, and it was beginning to acquire weight, it fell down. This seems to have happened two or three times. Then, collecting a great number of sticks, they built up a sort of cone upon the staircase, the summit of which rose to the level of the

window sill, and afforded the requisite support for the nest."

Other well authenticated examples abound of instinctive action modified by reason, and closely simulating that of genius.

Genius in poetry is happily illustrated in Shakespeare. Surely no poet ever presented ideas to the mind's eye with so much of beauty and originality as Shakespeare, whose lofty genius struck out from everything he touched some new truth, idealising humanity in every type and in every phase of existence. "This Titan," says Schlegel, "who storms the heavens, and threatens to throw the world off its hinges ; who, more fruitful than Æschylus, makes our hair stand on end, and congeals our blood with horror, possessed at the same time the insinuating loveliness of the sweetest poetry. He plays with love like a child, and

his songs are breathed out like melting sighs
He unites in his genius the utmost elevation
and the utmost depth. The world of spirits and
nature have laid their treasures at his feet. In
strength a demigod, in profundity of view a
prophet, in all-seeing wisdom a protecting spirit
of the highest order, he lowers himself to
mortals as if unconscious of his superiority,
and is as open and unassuming as a child."

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that Milton,
Dante, Coleridge, Goethe, and others were
noble illustrations of transcendent genius.
Coleridge was poet and metaphysician at the
age of fifteen, and developed extraordinary
intellectual power and originality as he
advanced in years. Goethe displayed his
genius before he reached his eighth year.
And as age advanced, his original and lofty
intelligence shone forth with marvellous
splendour. In the sublimity of his special
poetic imagery the genius of Milton stands

alone. But the same remark undoubtedly applies to Italy's greatest poet, Dante, as to his special poetic genius.

In Mozart the finest example of genius in music which, perhaps, the world has ever seen is to be found: genius at once the most elevated and the most profound. The poetry of sound in Mozart was an inspiration. His life was a musical poem, which began in his infancy and terminated only with his mortal existence. He was born in 1756, and the harmonies which he breathed over the world have been floating down the stream of time, in inspiring melodies, to the present hour; and will, almost certainly, be carried onward for ages to come. "Music is a prophecy of what life is to be—the rainbow of promise translated out of seeing into hearing." The purifying influence of a genius

like that of Mozart is incalculable. The creative power of his imagination was stupendous and the artistic taste with which it was accomplished has, perhaps, never been surpassed in any age or country. "Orpheus' lute," says Shakespeare, "was strung with poets' sinews." The instinctive musical faculty of Mozart was developed in infancy. Pope gives us some idea how soon in life he was a versifier when he tells us that he "lisp'd in numbers, for the numbers came ;" but at four years of age Mozart was actually a composer, and at six he composed music without the aid of a musical instrument. Yet his power, contrary to common experience, constantly increased with his years, so that effects were ever evolved from his imagination, of which the original type existed only in his brain.

The lofty genius of Sir Isaac Newton is universally acknowledged. And in the philosophy of Nature his discovery of the law of gravitation is probably as great an achievement as was ever accomplished by man. The fall of an apple from a tree was, to myriads of men, a simple fact which in no way received further attention ; but to the observant eye, the analytic mind, the genius of Newton, the fact was of marvellous significance. It became with him undeniable evidence, and a fine illustration, of the law of centripetal attraction, or gravitation—a law which, when truthfully enunciated, became at once and for ever of universal application.

It is difficult to gauge the profundity of thought which the evolution of this discovery must have demanded ; or the intensity of mental labour which must have been required to work out and arrange the ascertained facts ; or the perspicuous mental vision which the

facts demanded in order that his fine inductions should realise this stupendous law. It is difficult to mark clearly the power and originality of a mind capable of such an achievement; but Newton's discoveries in the matters of light and of fluxions attest his transcendent genius hardly less distinctly.

In the realm of mental philosophy great men laboured, and magnificent achievements were reached, thousands of years ago; and it admits of question whether the intellectual powers of men in modern times have been more lofty or more profound than those which have been exercised in ages long past—whether the minds of Plato, or Euclid, or Aristotle, for example, were not capable of intellectual efforts as great, as difficult, and as original as those of Newton, or Descartes, or

Locke. Many, doubtless, would award the palm of superiority to the ancient philosophers. The conditions, however, were not identical. The data upon which intellectual achievements could be effected were, doubtless, in favour of modern philosophers. But the more limited field of psychological labours of the ancients afforded opportunity for more concentrated action. However all this may be, the name of Emmanuel Kant in modern philosophy stands out with especial brightness. And so, indeed, does that of Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne. Both men were possessed of great force and originality of character. Both were endowed with lofty imaginations and subtle reasoning power. Both were men of undoubted genius. Berkeley was a man of fine metaphysical acumen ; but he was discursive in his objects, and deductive rather than inductive in his methods of study, while his conclusions were often reached by argu-

ments at once laboured and difficult of realisation. The genius of Kant speedily reached a firm and substantial foundation, upon which he reared a magnificent superstructure. The influence of a man of genius, like Kant, upon the metaphysics of his own and all succeeding time is incalculable. When he took part in the promulgation of truths in psychology, its facts and its laws were absolutely chaotic, notwithstanding the labours of the many brilliant men who preceded him. Out of this chaos he educed order, and out of mystery he established a sound philosophy ; not, indeed, winning universal and immediate acceptance—that was humanly impossible—but establishing facts which were and are capable of affording sound and accurate data for further investigation, and thence for further discoveries. In the establishment of his philosophy he recognised the law—as, in fact, did Descartes, David Hume, and others

—that consciousness is the basis of all mental growth. He recognised, moreover, that without consciousness no mental manifestations, no cognitions, are possible ; that with it memory and cogitation are promptly established, as well as the power of recollection. With such a foundation the philosophy of Kant has borne, and in the ages to come will most probably continue to bear, abundant and healthy fruit.

Genius, then, constructive as well as creative, has exercised incalculable power in the progress and in the processes of civilisation. And the gradual development of the truths which it has evoked shows how necessary antecedent items of real knowledge were to the evolution of their successors. This has been happily illustrated in the history of the application of steam and of electricity

to the amelioration of the conditions of social life.

The employment of steam as a locomotor agent is a thing of comparatively modern growth; and its employment in the generation of electricity for the purposes of illumination a still more recent achievement.

The expansive power of steam must have been recognised thousands of years ago. It is, indeed, recorded of Hero of Alexandria, who lived one hundred and twenty years before the Christian era, that he contrived machines which were moved by the mechanical force of the vapour of water! and it is remarkable that those inventions—although supplemented by innumerable others—bore no very useful fruit for nearly two thousand years. But the power which the vapour of water possesses, in its expansion by the agency of heat, was known to the priests of ancient Teutonic temples, and in the secrecy

of their idolatrous worship was taken advantage of in order to impose upon the ignorance, the credulity, and the superstition of the people. The god Busterich, on the banks of the Weser, is said to have shown his displeasure by discharging a sort of thunderbolt, which was accompanied by a great noise, and immediately followed by a cloud which filled the temple wherein he was worshipped, to the astonishment and awe of his worshippers. All this was accomplished by the agency of steam, which was skilfully produced by the application of heat to a volume of water contained in the head of the god. Although the work of Hero was probably well known to the Marquis of Worcester, and to his predecessors and contemporaries ; and although the discoveries of Worcester (which constituted a kind of era in the history of the steam engine), pointed the way to the application of steam as a motor power, it was only

by the accumulation of facts, the growth of very many years, that the steam engine became a thing of acknowledged high practical importance as a motor and locomotor agent. A few years after the promulgation of the advanced knowledge of Worcester, Sir Samuel Morland and Denis Pepin (a Frenchman) carried the known facts of the agency of steam to much higher perfection. And Pepin really conceived the idea of producing a moving power by means of a piston working in a cylinder. Thence rapidly followed the inventions of Savory, of Newcomen, and of Watt—so many steps in the history of discovery, and of the application of discovered truths to man's advantage—footprints in the progress of genius. The extraordinary force of character, and the constructive genius of James Watt, effected marvellous results ; and when these were supplemented and complemented by those of George Stephenson, a

new departure was given to industrial enterprise—a readier means of transport by sea and land was discovered—a more rapid and a more reliable means of intercommunication was developed ; the vitality of peoples was quickened, and space was, as it were, abridged. And yet no sudden or instantly overpowering flood of knowledge had been thrown into or upon the minds of men. Wave upon wave pressed forward in notable correlation, with a gradual, if not an even, bound. “ If a watch-maker,” says Arago, “ well instructed in the history of his art, was required to give a categorical reply to the question, Who invented watches? he would remain mute ; but the question would be divested of much of its difficulty if he were required separately to declare, who discovered the use of the main-spring, the different forms of escapement, or the balance-wheel ? ” So it is with the steam-engine !

It is the privilege, as it is the glorious mission, of genius to provide for the coming generations, and to substantiate and give effect to achievements already reached. And thus it must ever be. The man of genius is essentially an innovator, crushing out of existence the works of great men who have gone before, and laying up stores of knowledge for the improvement and the illumination of the generations which are to follow. But the work is irresistible, and the enthusiasm which accompanies it is irrepressible. By each extension of knowledge man views objects around him from a higher standpoint, and by a clearer mental vision. And as attainment is reached, the world around is made to partake of the advanced knowledge which has been acquired, and with it to work on in its own busy round until another innovator arises, who, by the force of his own

genius, clears away the mists which have obscured former investigations ; makes again a more lofty survey and a keener and more penetrating search, and, by the inspiration which is within him, achieves still higher knowledge, which in its turn becomes the possession of his followers. Thus the world of intelligence has progressed up to the present time, and thus, in all human probability, it will progress in time to come.

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